

# Hand Holding Behaviors of Romantic Couples and Families

Terry F. Pettijohn II, Shujaat F. Ahmed, Audrey V. Dunlap, & Lauren N. Dickey

Coastal Carolina University, Conway, South Carolina, USA

## Abstract

The hand holding behavior of 886 romantic couples and family dyads in public locations around Myrtle Beach, South Carolina were observed. Males in heterosexual romantic couples, parents in parent-child pairs, and older siblings in child sibling pairs tended to place their hand on top when holding hands. Implications are discussed.

## Introduction

Nonverbal behaviors offer a wealth of information about the social dynamics within interpersonal relationships. When people hold hands, the hand holding behavior communicates information that the partners have some type of established relationship (i.e., we do not just hold hands with strangers), but the way in which people hold hands could indicate additional information about the status differential between the couple. In order to hold hands, one partner's hand must be on top with palm facing back while the other partner's hand is underneath, with palm facing up. Being on top or in front may indicate superiority in body positioning (Brown, 1965). Similarly, Borden and Hornleid (1978) found that males generally hold hands with their dominant hand and thereby place their romantic partners on their dominant side (for the majority, this is the right side). Chapell and colleagues (1998) investigated hand holding behaviors in romantic, college-aged, heterosexual couples and have found men's hands to be the upper hand significantly more often than women's. Additional factors have been investigated by Chapell and colleagues (1999), which shed light on the cultural differential between African American hand holders and American/Euro-American hand holders, indicating varying views of gender equality according to ethnicity. While height plays a significant role in hand positioning, the gender effect is reportedly a more significant factor in hand holding position of romantic couples.

We wanted to replicate the male upper hand effect found in previous research (Chapell et al., 1998, 1999), as well as expand these investigations beyond romantic, heterosexual, college student couples to families.

## Current Study Hypotheses

We predicted that when couples hold hands, the dominant partner's hand will be on top. Sex and age carry information about status in our culture and therefore we predicted that: 1) Male's hands will be on top when holding the hand of a female romantic partner; 2) Parent's (male's and female's) hands will be on top when holding the hand of a child; 3) Older children's hands will be on top when holding the hand of a younger child; 4) Taller individual's hands will be on top when holding hands with shorter individuals; and 5) Older individual's hands will be on top when holding hands with younger individuals.

## Method

**Participants.** In this study, the hand holding behaviors of 886 romantic couples and family dyads (80.1% Caucasian, 10.2% African American, 6.4% Hispanic, 2.5% Asian, and .8% other) were observed in public locations around the Myrtle Beach, South Carolina area during the summer of 2009. Approximately 15 million tourists visit the Grand Strand each year and the majority are families (56%) or couples (26%) (Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce, 2008).

**Observation Locations.** Various locations along the beach, public parks, Broadway at the Beach, Coastal Grand Mall, Barefoot Landing, Freestyle Music Park, and Market Common were selected to provide a representative sample of the area. Broadway at the Beach, The Market Common, and Barefoot Landing are tourist attractions where people can experience shopping, dining, and entertainment in beautifully-designed settings. Freestyle Music Park is an amusement park and Coastal Grand Mall is the largest mall in South Carolina.



**Observers and the Observation Process.** Four independent observers naturally observed each couple and family dyad in their environment and coded for sex, race, age category (children ages 1-12, teenagers ages 13-19, adults ages 20-60, or older adults ages 60+), whose hand was on top, relative height, estimated age difference, and relationship type (romantic or family). In this study, the hand on top in each handholding pair was defined as the hand that was observed to be held in front of and on top of the other couple's hand with the palm facing back. Observers randomly selected locations at random times on random days throughout the summer. Observers sat on a bench, waited, and recorded observations on a clipboard. The couples and family dyads were never approached or interviewed.

## Results

Among heterosexual romantic couples observed ( $n=362$ ), the male partner's hand was on top of the female's hand while holding hands in 87.85% of the cases,  $\chi^2 = 207.39$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\phi = .76$ .

Among adults holding hands with children ( $n=469$ ), the adult's hand was on top of the child's hand while holding hands in 97.65% of the cases,  $\chi^2 = 426.03$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\phi = .95$ . Female adult's hands were on top of the child's hand in 98.25% of the cases and male adult's hands were on top of the child's hand 97.24% of the cases.

Among children holding hands with other children ( $n=42$ ) each other, the older child's hand was on top of the younger child's hand when holding hands in 97.62% of the cases,  $\chi^2 = 38.10$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\phi = .95$ .

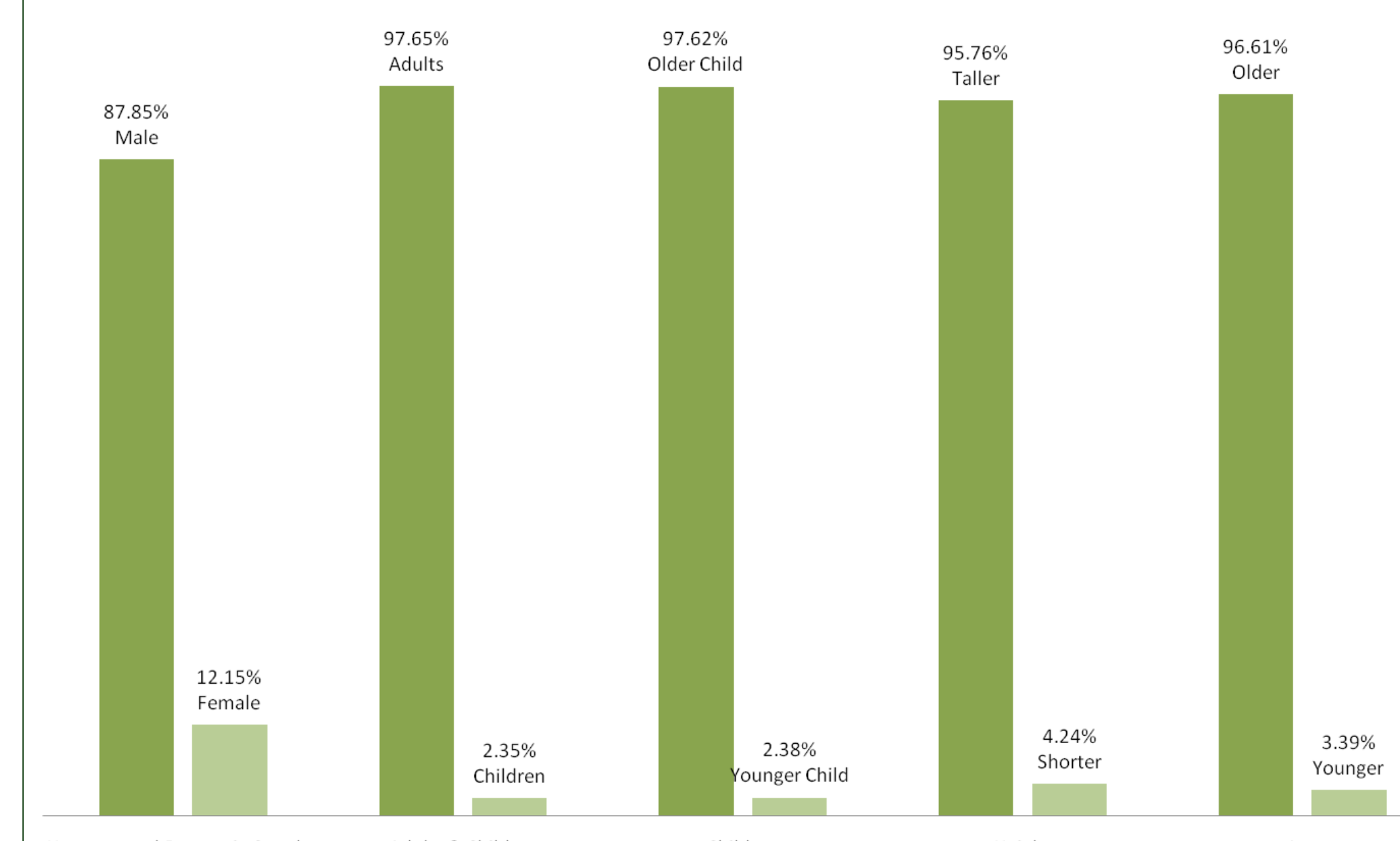
Among all pairs observed to be non-equal heights ( $n=850$ ), the taller individual's hand was on top of the shorter individual's hand when holding hands in 95.76% of the cases,  $\chi^2 = 712.10$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\phi = .92$ .

Among all pairs observed to be non-equal ages ( $n=649$ ), the older individual's hand was on top of the younger individual's hand when holding hands in 96.61% of the cases,  $\chi^2 = 563.98$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\phi = .96$ .

Additional analyses within race and observation location yielded similar patterns of hand holding.



Figure. Percentage Hand Holding Hand on Top by Observation Category



## Discussion

Results were consistent with previous research related to romantic partner hand holding patterns (Chapell et al., 1998, 1999) and the current predictions expanding the focus on family relationships. These findings reveal new details relating social dominance and hand holding behavior, especially in the area of family dynamics. Female adults, in particular, interestingly change their hand holding orientation between romantic partners and children as the power differential changes.

Limitations include not knowing for certain the true age and relationship of those observed. Also, our sample was primarily Caucasian. Participants were mostly tourists on vacation, who may have acted differently while relaxing on holiday.

Future research, including experimental manipulations of power differentials in hand holding scenarios, may build on these initial observations. Future studies may also consider homosexual hand holding behaviors, cultural differences, and other special populations.

## Selected References

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## Contact Information

Terry F. Pettijohn II, Ph.D.  
Department of Psychology  
Coastal Carolina University  
P.O. Box 261954  
Conway, South Carolina  
29528-6054

Phone: 843-349-6447  
Fax: 843-349-2857  
Email: pettijohn@coastal.edu



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